

JOSIAH CLARK NOTT, A SOUTHERN PHYSICIAN*

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JOSIAH CLARK NOTT had a varied and productive medical and scientific life which occupied approximately the middle half of the 19th century. A native of Columbia, S.C., he lived and worked mostly in Mobile. His professional career reached its peak during the pre-Civil War days and concluded eight years after the war was over.

Josiah Nott was tall, thin, and of cadaverous appearance. He had a very attractive personality. As a general scholar there was hardly a topic that he was not able to discuss fluently and well. He was lively and loved to tell stories. He was a striking example of a Southern gentleman. Among his forebears were several distinguished educators and preachers.

After completing his undergraduate work at South Carolina College in 1824, Nott began his medical education at home; his preceptor was Dr. James Davis. In 1825 he entered the College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City, where he came under the influence of Dr. Valentine Mott. He then transferred to Philadelphia, where he studied medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, gaining the M.D. degree in 1827.

There were no first-class medical schools in the Southern states, except for the University of Virginia, which was then just emerging as an influential institution. The best young men who wished to study medicine went to Philadelphia, New York, or Boston if they could; a few wealthy or fortunate ones went abroad, particularly to Edinburgh or London. Young Nott was an intern in the Philadelphia almshouse, "Old Blockley," from September 1827 to September 1828. He probably developed his enthusiasm for anthropology during the year after he

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interned, when he worked as demonstrator in anatomy for Drs. William Edmonds Horner and Philip Syng Physick at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School.

In 1830 Nott returned home to Columbia, established himself in practice, and married Sarah Deas, the daughter of Col. James S. Deas. In 1835 he went to Paris to obtain further medical training and to expand his knowledge of natural history and kindred sciences. He spent most of his time in France, but he also visited hospitals, clinics, and medical schools in several other countries.

Studying in Paris during the golden years of clinical medicine in that city brought Nott into contact with René-T.-H. Laënnec, Pierre-C.-A. Louis, Gabriel Andral, Auguste-François Chomel, Jean-Nicolas Corvisart, and with the firebrand François-J.-V. Broussais. Presumably he was influenced most by Broussais, whose treatise on inflammation Nott translated into English. Broussais found enthusiastic followers and translators in Germany, Belgium, Holland, and Spain as well. Nott became learned in anatomy by dissection and instruction. He studied pathology as well as clinical medicine in the great hospitals in Paris.

Nott had profited greatly from his travels and from his many-sided medical experiences. After postgraduate training in Paris he returned to the United States and settled in the burgeoning city of Mobile. There he quickly gained a large and lucrative practice as physician and surgeon. His reputation was soon established throughout the Southern states.

Nott was no militant foe of slavery—indeed no professional man would stay in the South if he was—but Nott and some of his colleagues established a small hospital for black persons, both slave and free. It was known as Dr. J. C. Nott's Infirmary and continued to function until its place was taken by the establishments of the Freedman's Bureau after the Civil War.

In his practice Nott tended to use drugs sparingly. One biographer says: "He often preferred to leave *nature* alone to work out for herself the grand problems of life and death, especially did he seem to comprehend the influence of the mind over the body in disease, and to be governed thereby in his therapeutics." He was also a judicious and not self-deluded user of placebos. He was an enormously effective physician, especially with a great many neurotics, and his magnetism in the sick room brought his patients comfort. By nature he was enthusi-

astic and he was able to impart confidence to his patients. It is related that he did have some therapeutic hobbies, but they were not the strong or heroic remedies used by his colleagues. After a period of original doubt, Nott developed a lively but still-critical interest in hypnotism, which he studied with objectivity and insight.

His reputation as a surgeon was such that he had but one acknowledged rival, Dr. Warren Stone of New Orleans. Nott is said to have performed successfully all the major operations and surgery of his day, improving some and indeed inventing others, such as removal of the coccyx. He was active in the Mobile Medical Society. In 1841 he was instrumental in framing an act to revise the Alabama state law regulating the practice of medicine.

Nott also continued to have an interest in medical education. During one year (1857) he occupied the Chair of Anatomy in the University of Louisiana at New Orleans. When he returned to his practice in Mobile, he and some friends obtained a charter to found the Medical College of Alabama. Nott was appointed to the Chair of Surgery and commissioned to go to Europe to collect the necessary library, physiological equipment, and anatomical preparations for the museum, so important in the teaching of pathology and anatomy. Since a rented building had not proved satisfactory, Nott went before the Alabama legislature, which appropriated \$50,000 for a suitable building. In this college he lectured on surgery for two sessions. When the Civil War broke out, the doors were closed; the same happened in many other educational institutions in the South.

In his widespread general practice he did obstetrics and later much gynecology. His most famous delivery was that of a male infant, William Crawford Gorgas, destined to achieve greater distinction by far than Nott. Josiah Clark Nott in 1848 published his historic paper on yellow fever and mosquitoes and on October 3, 1854 delivered Mrs. Gorgas of her son, William Gorgas. William's father, Capt. Josiah Gorgas, had been at West Point, had served in the Mexican campaign, and later was assigned to duty in the Mount Vernon Arsenal, Ala., a few miles north of Mobile. There Captain Gorgas had met and married Amelia Gayle, the daughter of a former governor of Alabama. They had just fled from New Orleans to escape an epidemic of yellow fever raging in that city to Toulminville, Mount Vernon, Ala., where William was born. Gorgas later went on to put the Reed Board's discoveries

Name **Nott, Josiah Clark, M. D.** *no. on roll* **582**
Application, date: **May 1, 1871** *remarks*
Election, date: **June 1, 1871** *payment of admission fee, date* **June 3, 1871**
Endorsers **T. M. Markoe, J. T. Metcalfe, T. G. Thomas.**
Birth, place: **Columbia, Richland District, date** **Mar. 31, 1804**
South Carolina.
Graduation in medicine, place: **University of Pennsylvania, 1827**
Offices in Academy
Ceased membership, cause: *date*
Death, place: **Mobile, Alabama** *Cause* **Phthisis** *date* **Mar. 31, 1873**
Pulmon. **69 yrs.**

Address when elected **50 West 22nd Street, N. Y. City.**

Addresses subsequently **- ditto -**

Kelly's Cyclop. Amer. Med. Biog., V. 2, 1912, p. 221.

Remarks **Obituary: N. Y. Med. J. l., V. 17, 1873, p. 560 and p. 654;**
also Med. & Surg. Rept. of Phila., Vol. 28, 1873, p. 310; and
Med. Rec., N. Y., V. 8, 1873, p. 216; Med. Reg. of N. Y., 1873-74
p. 345; and Trans. Amer. Med. Ass'n, V. 29, 1878, p. 727-733.

Obverse and reverse of Dr. Josiah Clark Nott's membership card in files of the
 New York Academy of Medicine. Original size $5\frac{7}{8}$ in. \times 4 in.

about the mosquito into effect, along with other sanitary measures which permitted the building of the Panama Canal.

Nott served as an active military surgeon, operating and teaching throughout the Civil War. After the war ended, the enervating heat of the Mobile summers ultimately led him to remove to Baltimore, where he practiced for a year while he mastered new advances in surgical gynecology. He moved to New York in 1868, expecting to spend the rest of his professional life there. In 1871 he became a Fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine and his name is preserved in the Academy's membership files (see illustration).

The cold New York winters proved too severe, however, and he began to show signs of pulmonary tuberculosis. A brief stay in the fall of 1873 at Aiken, S.C., proved of little benefit and he returned to Mobile, where he died surrounded by his family, patients, and admirers.

Yellow fever, the menace of the South, was a recurring feature of Josiah Nott's life. We do not have evidence that he ever had yellow fever although he lived in an area where it was recurrently epidemic; he treated hundreds of patients in eight serious outbreaks. Indeed, he is described as riding day and night for periods up to two months at a time, surviving without harm and being ready to go on with his professional routine when the refugees from the epidemic returned to the city. Yellow fever, which formed such a ghoulish theme in Southern coastal cities before the work of Walter Reed, brought repeated opportunities for heroic work but also brought personal bereavement. Of the Notts' eight children, one died early in childhood during the yellow fever epidemic of 1853, four others died later of the disease within a week, and two of his sons, Confederate soldiers, died in the Civil War. Only one survived him.

Nott produced several works on anthropology, but his ideas in this field have become outmoded. He is perhaps best remembered for his views on yellow fever, which he knew well from both personal observation and extensive reading on the subject. He concluded that the spread of yellow fever could not be explained by any of the laws governing gases, vapors, and emanations, but that the disease had an inherent power of propagation, independent of atmospheric conditions. He also thought that it was a clinical entity distinct from malaria and intermittent fevers. At this time there was a widespread, if not general, belief that febrile diseases had a great variety of manifestations. Indeed, some

went so far as to say that all disease was a single one with many variations on its central themes. Nott concluded that yellow fever might be spread by an insect or some lower form of life. He mentioned mosquitoes along with other flying insects.

His belief that the cause of yellow fever was a living organism was a doctrine well in advance of what was accepted by the majority of physicians during his life and for several decades thereafter. The general belief was that yellow fever was spread by filth, as we know typhoid fever is.

In addition to being an expert surgeon and a skilled physician, Nott had a special interest in obstetrics and gynecology. He was one of the founders of the New York Obstetrical Society. During his New York period he was closely affiliated with a fellow Southern expatriot, the pioneer surgeon and gynecologist Marion Sims. Nott had a wide-ranging intellect. He was, if not restless, at least quite mobile and seemed to thrive on a change of scene until the last part of his life, when he appeared to have exhausted himself. His widespread interests and skills were illustrated at an early age in his translation of Broussais' essay on inflammation. Besides his books on anthropology, his published papers dealing with yellow fever, leeches, lithotomy, an operation for cataract, endometritis, intrauterine medication, bone surgery, and nerve surgery. He also described a number of surgical instruments which he devised or invented.

He was depicted as a typical Southern gentleman, whose courage, honor, and chivalry were never doubted. Often he was called in to arbitrate between parties with seemingly irreconcilable differences. He had no formal religious preference, although he had the attributes of a practicing Christian.

He was a man of conspicuous capacity as a physician; he was kind and cared for rich and poor alike; he took an interest in blacks; and did more than the average Southern physician in this respect. All told, he was a highly organized and productive man. If he was something of a therapeutic nihilist, it was perhaps because therapeutic nihilism was the clinical wisdom of his day.

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